

CIA/OSR /MEMO EF 75 09 PRE MILITARY OPTIONS IN
THE TAIWAN STRAIT SECRET/NFD

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PRC Military Options in the Taiwan Strait
and the South China Sea in 1976

Principal Conclusions

Although the Chinese traditionally have shown restraint in their use of force, they have not hesitated to engage in military operations after determining that a sufficient threat or provocation existed and that there were reasonably good prospects for success. This was illustrated by Peking's actions in the Paracels in early 1974.

There are four areas in the East and South China Seas where the Chinese conceivably could exercise options; these include Pratas Island, the Spratlys, the Offshore Islands, and the Pescadores. Peking, however, probably will not initiate military operations in 1976 unless the threat to its interest escalates perceptibly.

From Peking's point of view, the major constraints on initiating military actions in 1976 appear to be:

- reluctance to alter the delicately balanced Sino-US-soviet triangle
- fear of further growth of Soviet influence in southeast Asia
- desire to avoid a deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations
- inability to mount amphibious operations on a large scale

Several contingencies, however, could alter the prognosis for 1976.

- A US abrogation of its defense treaty with the ROC, or any limitations on the grounds for US intervention, could remove major constraints to PRC action.
- A pronounced deterioration in Sino-US relations could induce China to probe US resolve in the Taiwan Strait area.

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- Any lessening of the Sino-Soviet dispute could increase Peking's freedom of action in regard to any of its options. The converse would be true if Sino-Soviet relations worsened.
- A serious rift with Vietnam might cause the PRC to intervene in the South China Sea.
- Confirmation that Taipei was close to developing a nuclear device could conceivably provoke PRC action against the ROC.

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PRC Military Options in the Taiwan Strait
and the South China Sea in 1976

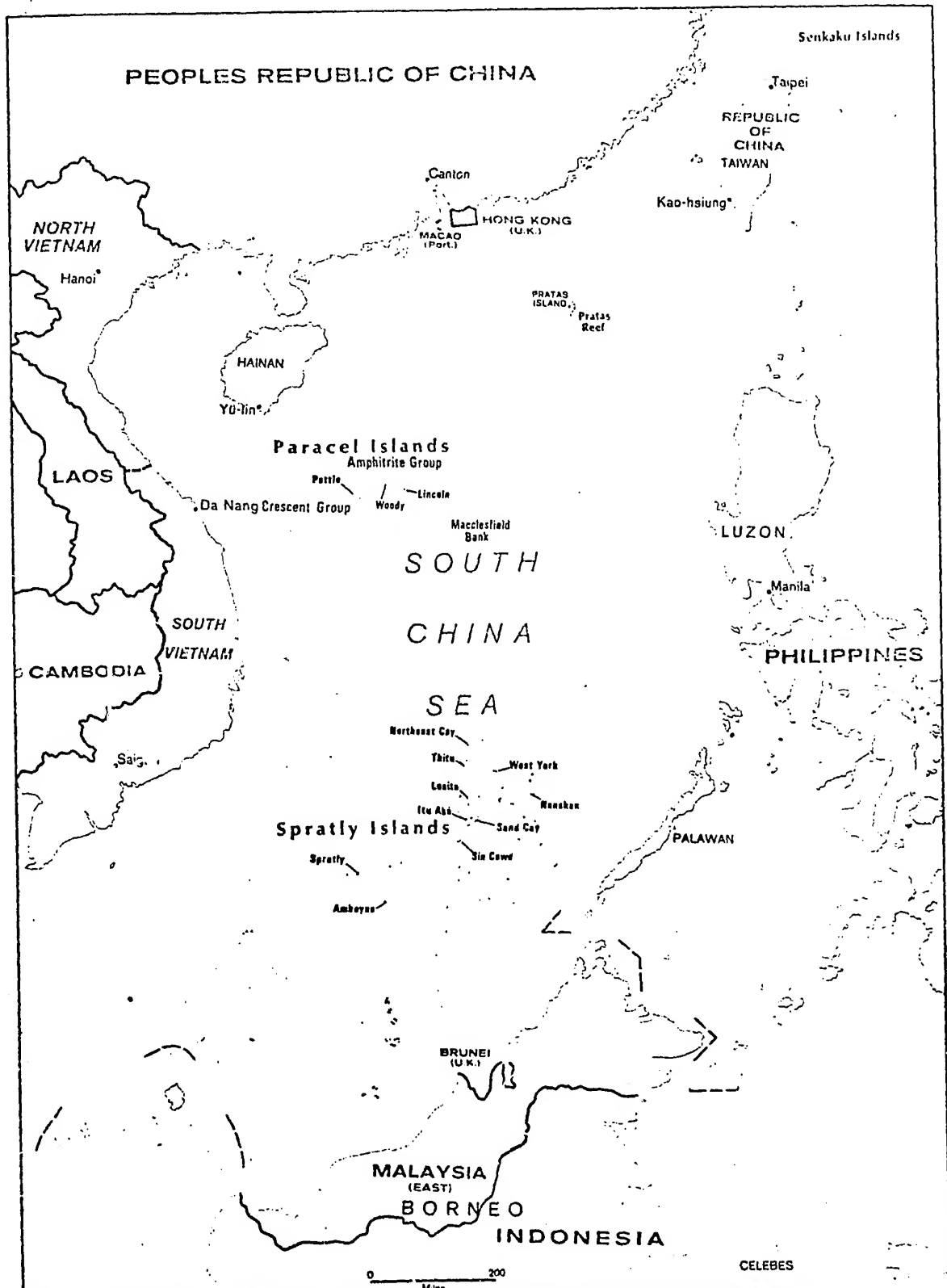
Introduction:

Peking's past military operations have been characterized by caution and restraint. Nevertheless, the PRC has shown little hesitation to use force after determining that a sufficient threat or provocation existed and that there were reasonably good prospect for success. Peking's intervention in the Korean Conflict in 1950 and actions taken against India in 1962 are prime examples. Nor did Peking, in its limited military actions in 1958 and 1962, hesitate to use force against Taiwan. Only recently, PRC spokesmen indicated that force continues to be an option in the Paracels last year demonstrated a capability to initiate limited military operations over water successfully.

With the past as prologue, this paper will examine a variety of military options--those regarding Pratas Island, the Spratlys, the Offshore Islands, and the Pescadores.

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The Likelihood of the PRC's Initiating Military Operations
in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea in 1976

Even in the short term, predicting any nation's intentions to engage in a military adventure is difficult. In the past Peking's decisions regarding the use or non-use of force appear to have involved rational considerations of national interests based on military, political, and economic factors. An assessment of these considerations in terms of risk, gain, and military capabilities constitutes one means of predicting the likelihood of future military operations, but the conclusions reached must be considered as only rough approximations.

The major constraints on PRC military actions in 1976 appear to be China's reluctance to alter the delicately balanced Sino-US-Soviet triangle, Peking's fear of further growth of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia and a related desire to avoid a deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations, and China's inability to mount amphibious operations on a large scale. The primary impetus for military actions is the long-standing desire to recove all Chinese-claimed territory, particularly Taiwan's reunification with the mainland, and an avid interest in the potential economic resources in the adjacent East and South China Seas.

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Clearly, the prize most coveted by the PRC is Taiwan. In the short term, however, peaceful reunification appears highly unlikely and, as long as the US maintains its defense commitments to the Republic of China, a PRC invasion would offer no expectation of success. We have therefore excluded this option for the PRC in 1976.

Pratas Island, controlled by the ROC and claimed by Peking, could be overwhelmed by a PRC assault or blockade at any time. The island has no strategic importance, however, and Peking probably is willing to defer action there--pending the resolution of the overall Taiwan issue--when Pratas would fall to the PRC by default.

In the Spratlys, unless there is confirmation of large deposits of exploitable natural resources, Peking probably is willing to let time take its course. The ROC presence on Itu Aba in the Spratlys for now may be sufficient protection for a "Chinese" claim to the islands, whereas the projection of Peking's forces into the area would run the risk of military confrontations both with Vietnam and the Philippines--countries with which Peking would be reluctant to precipitate a deterioration in relations.

Unlike the preceding areas, the Offshore Islands have formidable defenses. A PRC blockade to force the Nationalist garrisons to capitulate is feasible and would be the least risky course for Peking, but would require six to twelve

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months to achieve success. Peking's fears that a campaign against the Offshore Islands might disbalance the Sino-US-Soviet triangle or cause the US to reassess its support for Taiwan, however, appear to be the most important constraints to PRC military actions there in 1976.

A PRC assault or blockade of the Pescadores is the most improbable option. Such an action would be regarded in Taipei as a prelude to an attack on Taiwan, requiring a maximum defensive effort. In any event, the chances of PRC military operations in 1976 against the Pescadores are highly unlikely because of the strong possibility of intervention in some fashion by the US.

Situations Which Could Alter the Peaceful Prognosis
US Actions. A US abrogation of its defense treaty with the ROC, or any limitations on the grounds for US intervention, could remove major constraints to PRC action against the Offshore Islands, the Pescadores, and even Taiwan. Nonetheless, fear of destroying the improving relations with the US probably would still act as an important deterrent to PRC military adventures.

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A pronounced deterioration in Sino-US relations also could lead China to probe US resolve in the Taiwan Strait area. If the US acted with firmness, Peking probably would pull back from the brink of confrontation--especially in the case of the Pescadores and probably in the case of the Offshore Islands as well.

Soviet Actions. Any lessening of the Sino-Soviet dispute could increase Peking's freedom of action in regard to any of its options. Under such circumstances, additional military forces would be available and, more important, Peking might be willing to accept some deterioration in Sino-US detente.

On the other hand, worsening of Sino-Soviet relations would further reduce Peking's freedom of action. Under such circumstances, Peking probably would avoid any military operation that reduced the capabilities of PRC forces assigned to or designated as reinforcements for the northern border. Thus, the PRC also would be particularly unwilling to take any action leading to a deterioration in Sino-US detente.

Vietnamese Actions. A serious rift with Vietnam might cause the PRC to intervene in the south China Sea. Specifically, action by the Vietnamese to seize all the Spratlys might oblige the PRC to react with force. However, the likelihood of such a confrontation, assuming a maximum Vietnamese effort,

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is difficult to judge. In fact, the PRC may concede that its capabilities, in an area so far from the mainland bases, are insufficient against the well-equipped and experienced Vietnamese.

ROC Actions. Confirmation that Taipei was close to developing a nuclear device could conceivably provoke PRC action against the ROC. Peking might first attempt to pressure Taipei to terminate the project by urging the US to exert its influence. Failing this, military action might be considered. But any such action, diplomatic or military, seems beyond the time frame of this memorandum.

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Pratas IslandPRC Military Capabilities: [REDACTED]Likelihood of Initiating Military Action: unlikelyOpposing Forces*:

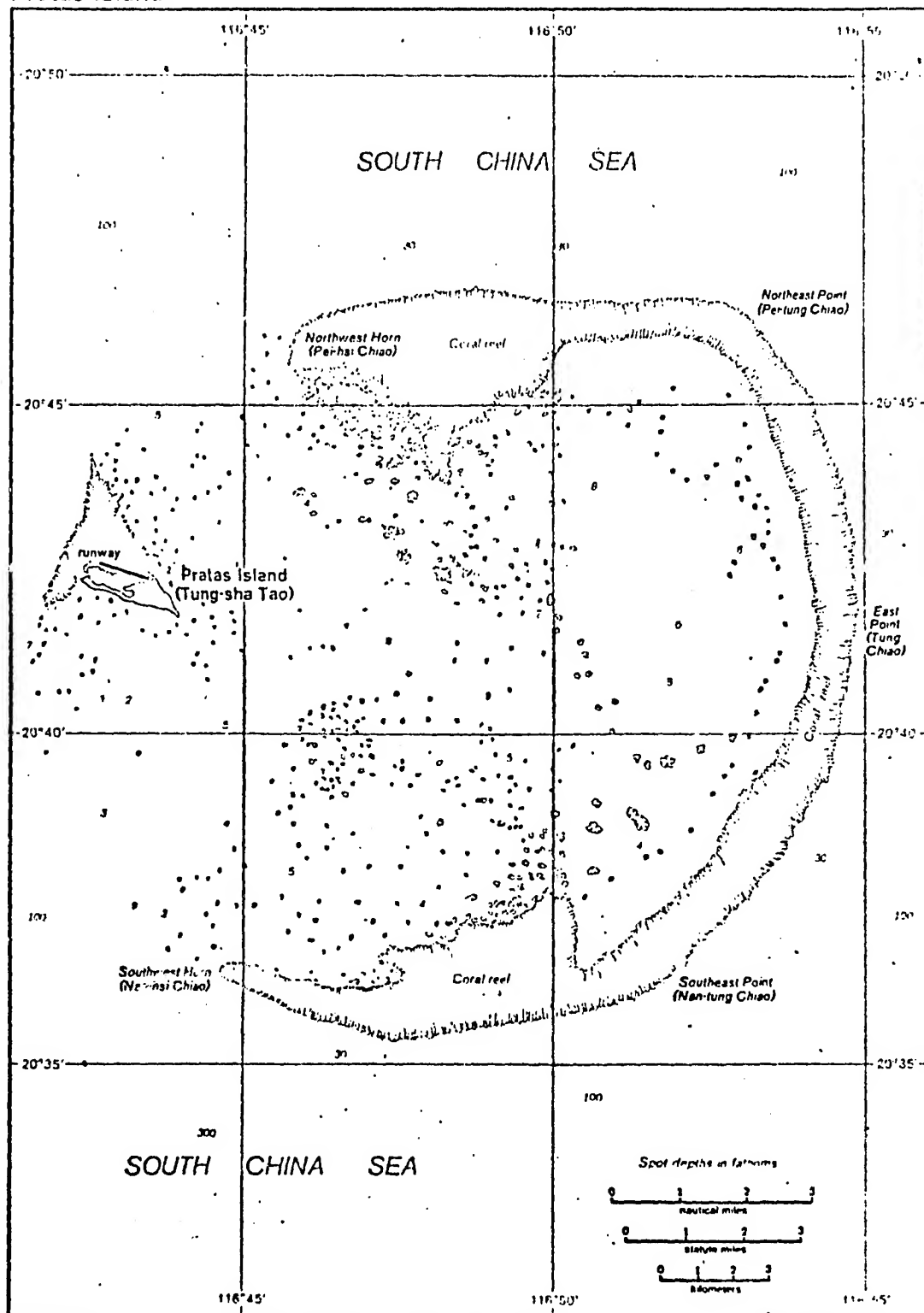
	<u>PRC</u>	<u>ROC</u>
Ground	1,500-2,500	300-500
Air	650 fighters 50 bombers	0
Navy	2 LSTs 4 LSMs 1 Luta DDG 1-2 Riga DEGSS 2-3 Kiangnan DEs 2-3 MSFs 2-3 PCs (2-3 Osas and Huchwans, if required)	0

Background: Pratas Island is a circular coral barrier reef, roughly 13 miles in diameter, with an island on the west side. It is about 135 miles from the mainland and 340 miles southwest of Taiwan. The reef, located a few miles northeast of the sea lane between Hong King and Manila, is a

* Data included in the tables of opposing forces are in part judgmental. After the size of the garrison was determined in each case, the likelihood of reinforcements to augment those troops committed to defend the area was assessed. This led to estimates of the PRC forces--required and available--based on such factors as distances from the mainland and ranges of weapon systems. Ground force requirements were developed the assumption that, at minimum, a 5-1 numerical superiority was essential.

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Pratas Island



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shipping hazard because soundings give little warning of its proximity. Most of it uncovers at low tide. Its lagoon is studded with coral heads and a few rocks. Anchorages are available only for small ships.

Both Chinas claim ownership of Pratas, but neither has made a public issue of it in recent years. The PRC has never occupied the island. The ROC maintains a military garrison there of about 300 troops and in 1964 constructed an airfield with a 5,000 foot concrete runway on the north arm of the island. Few, if any, prepared defensive positions have been built. The ROC also operates a weather observatory and a radio station on the island.

Discussion Peking would gain little by occupying the island. Pratas has little military or economic significance, and the PRC probably is willing to maintain the status quo, awaiting settlement of the larger issue of Taiwan. Peking may fear that seizing Pratas would have some adverse effect on achieving its long range objectives of reducing US ties with the Nationalists and reunifying Taiwan with the mainland.

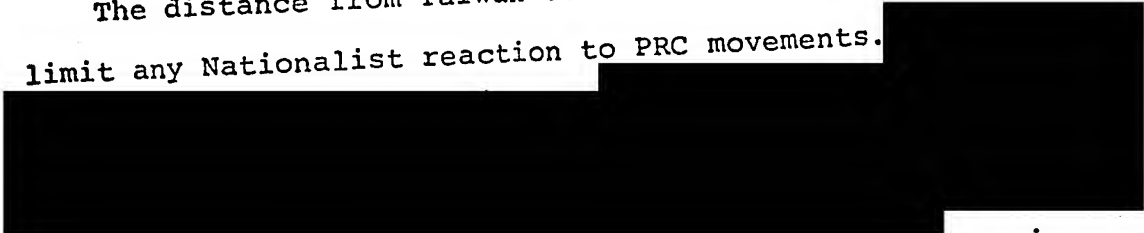
But if the PRC decided to dislodge the ROC from Pratas, it could easily establish sea and air supremacy. Furthermore, the small PRC garrison probably could be quickly overcome, because ample forces are available for an invasion. Geographic

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factors require that any assault against Pratas be made by small boats or rubber rafts approaching from the west. Coincident with an amphibious assault, an airborne force of 200-300 troops could be used to secure the runway and disrupt ROC defenses. The PRC also is capable of blockading the island--a method that would result in far fewer casualties.

The distance from Taiwan to Pratas would severely limit any Nationalist reaction to PRC movements.



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Spratly Islands

PRC Military Capabilities:



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Likelihood of Initiating Military Action: doubtful

<u>Opposing Forces:</u>	<u>PRC</u>	<u>ROC</u>	<u>DRV</u>	<u>Philippines</u>
Ground	2,500	500	100	200
Air*	10 IL-28RS (used for reconnais- sance only)	0	200 MIGs 17/19/21s 100 F-5s/A-37s	0
Navy	2 LSTs 4 LSMs 1 Luta DDGSS 1-2 Riga DEGSs 1-2 Kiangnan DES 4-5 MSFs 2-3 AOs 2-3 AKs	0	3 Komars 24-36 patrol gun Boats	0

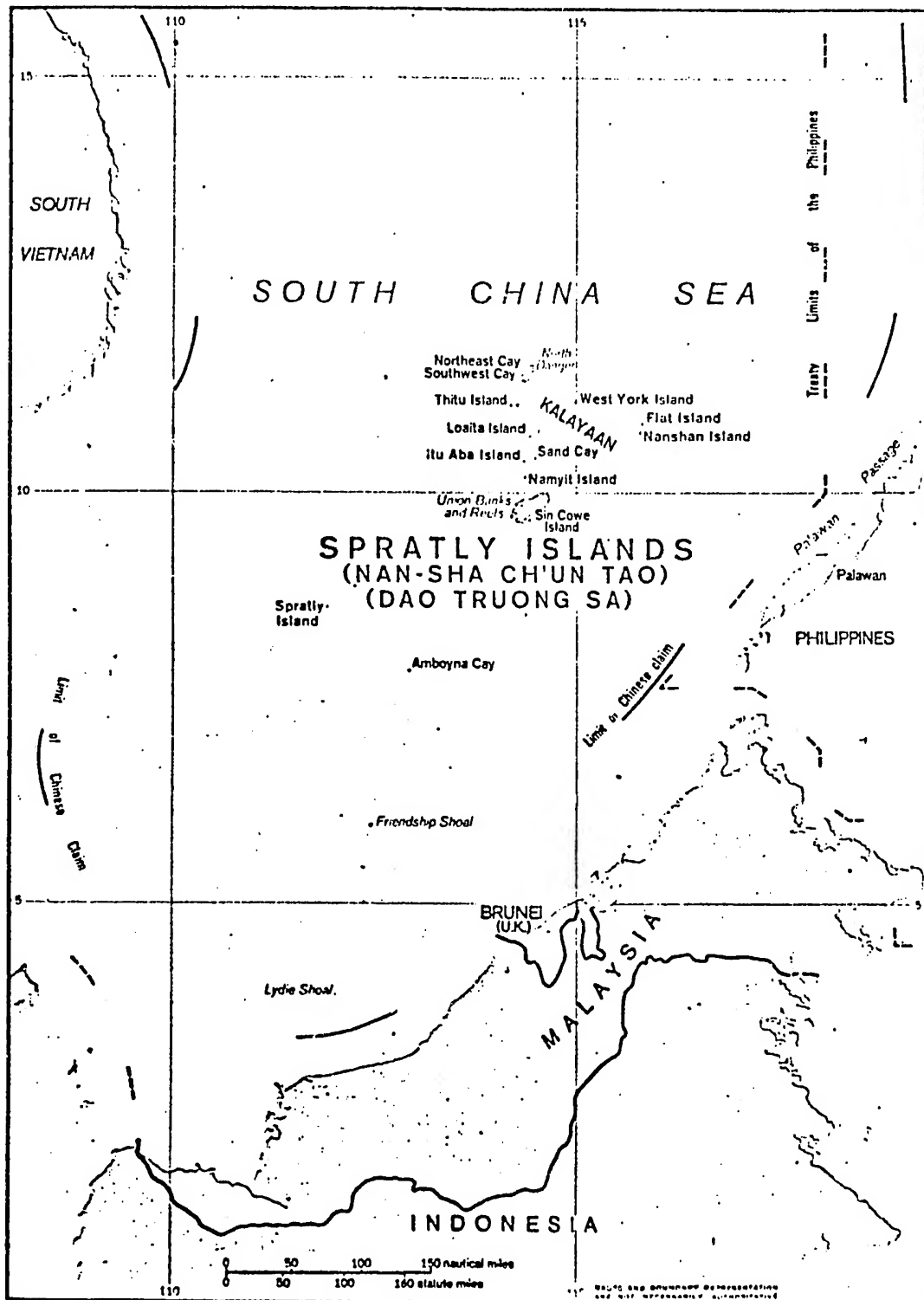
Background: Sovereignty over the Spratlys, which number some 80 small islands, islets, reefs and rocks, has been in dispute for over a century. As recently as January 1974, the PRC reiterated its claim to the Spratlys, but unlike the other claimants--Vietnam, the Philippines, and the ROC--it has not established a presence there. Although the total land area of the islands is only one square mile, the possibility of discovering exploitable seabed resources in the area insures continuing friction over ownership.

* PRC TU-16 bombers could operate over the Spratlys, but because they would be without fighter escorts are not likely to be used.

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Spratly Islands



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Discussion Peking clearly considers the Spratlys its territory, but probably recognizes that, for the moment, the ROC presence satisfactorily protects the interests and claims of both Chinas. If the PRC attempted to establish its own presence, it would only marginally advance its claims of sovereignty and would run the risk of embroiling itself in a military confrontation with the Vietnamese, Philippine, and Nationalist garrisons posted there. At minimum, protest from the other claimants would be vociferous. Peking probably could expect more complicated relations with Vietnam and some loss of influence. Recent improvements in Sino-Philippine relations also would be jeopardized. Under such circumstances, the PRC probably is willing to negotiate the question of sovereignty and, for the present, is content to observe the status quo.

Nevertheless, if one of the claimants, most likely Vietnam, attempted or threatened to resolve the question of sovereignty by force, the PRC might be provoked to intervene. Peking may possess the military capability to seize the Spratlys by force.

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Only the Vietnamese would be able to mount a stiff resistance.

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The PRC navy is capable of directly attacking any of the islands. All are basically flat, without defensive positions, and are highly vulnerable to shore bombardment. Moreover, no other navy, alone could successfully challenge the PRC, if it deployed its missile-equipped surface ships. Putting troops on the Spratlys, however, would be more difficult because in many instances only small boats and rubber rafts could be used. The 300-500 Nationalist soldiers on Itu Aba and the Vietnamese garrisons could be expected to put up a much stiffer resistance than that which the Chinese encountered in the Paracels.

The decisive factor for the PRC would be the amount of air power the Vietnamese would be willing to commit. Only the PRC's medium jet bombers and light jet reconnaissance aircraft have the range to operate over the Spratlys. But its forces would be operating with essentially no air cover making it unlikely that bombers would be used. If the Vietnamese mounted concentrated and repeated air attacks, Peking probably would be forced to withdraw. If air attacks were sporadic--an unlikely possibility--then the PRC navy would have a reasonable chance of defending itself.

It any event, before establishing a military presence in the Spratlys, the PRC probably would take preparatory

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steps to minimize the risks to its naval force, which hitherto has performed little more than a coastal defense mission. Such steps might include extensive surveying and charting of the archipelago, additional training of main surface force units in shore bombardment and in long-range navigation. Rehearsals also would be desirable for coordinating amphibious assaults--duplicating as closely as possible the beach and offshore conditions to be encountered. Except for limited amphibious training, which probably is normal military training not directly related, there has been no evidence that the PRC is preparing for operations in the Spratlys.

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Offshore Islands

PRC Military Capabilities:



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Likelihood of Initiating Military Action: doubtful

<u>Opposing Forces:</u>	<u>PRC</u>	<u>ROC</u>
Ground	400,000 (from coastal MRs if required)	80,000
Air	1750 fighters 240 bombers	250 fighters 2 DDGSS 3 DDGs
Navy	23 submarines 70 fast guided missiles boats 1 Luta DDGS 1 Kiangtund DEG 1 Kiangnan DE 11 patrol frigates 300 PTs, and motor gunboats	12 DDs 3 DEs 3 PCEs 10 PFs 6 PTCs 22 MSS 28 Amphibious Ships 3 motor transport boats

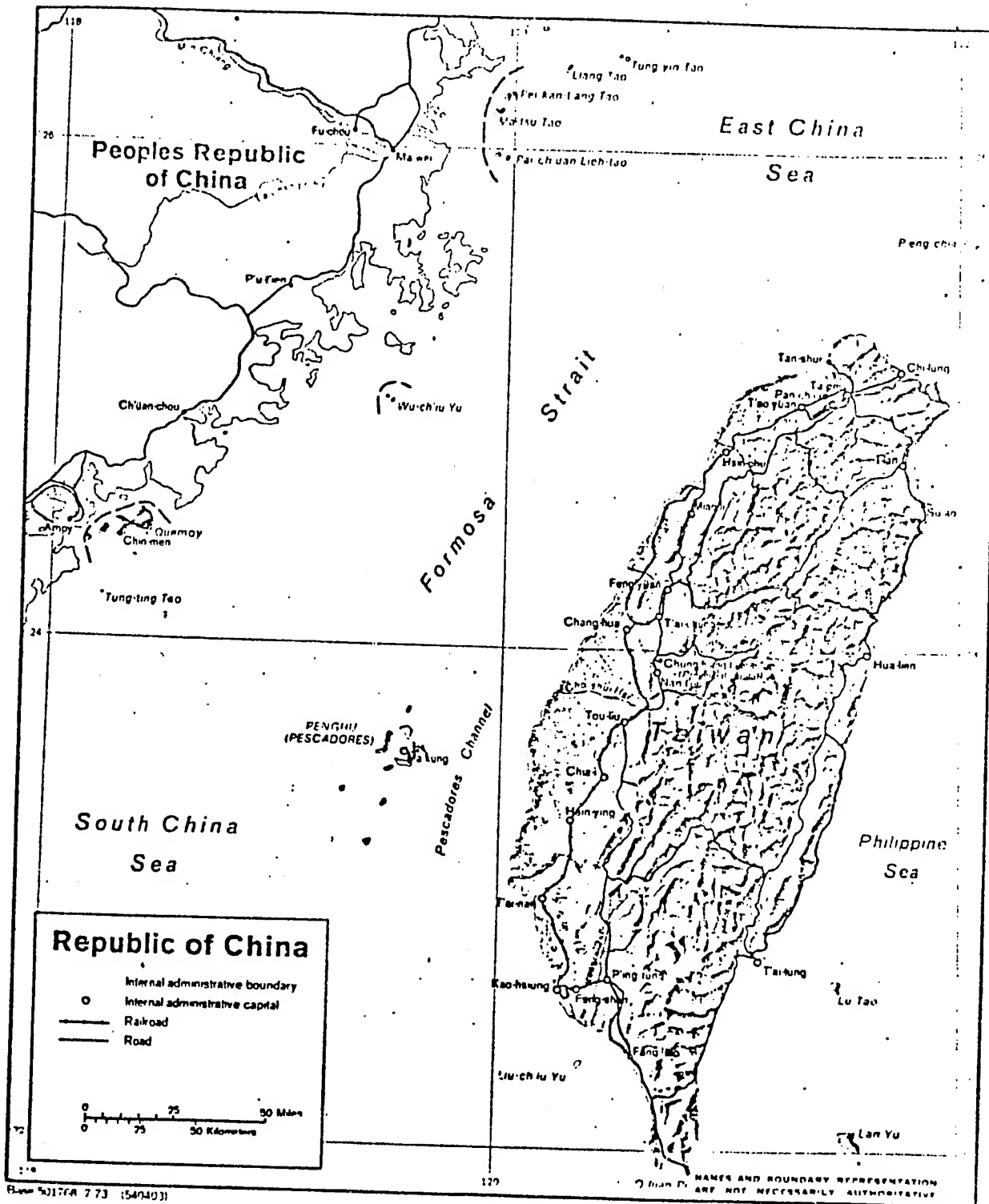
Background The Offshore Islands, controlled by the ROC, consist of four island groups. Only two of these--Quemoy (Chin-men) and Ma-tsu--are defended in strength. The island of Quemoy, which commands the entrance to Amoy harbor, has been made into a nearly impregnable fortress. The two smaller island groups, Wu-chiu and Tung-yin, are included in the Ma-tsu Defense Command,



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The approximately 80,000 troops deployed on the Quemoy and Ma-tsu island groups constitute 22 percent of the entire ROC army. Because most of the islands lie within artillery range of the mainland, extensive underground defensive positions have been constructed. Quemoy's underground complexes, which include living quarters, artillery positions, tank and truck emplacements, docks and even a 1,000 seat amphitheater, provide protection from all but nuclear attack. Heavily mined beaches, defensive obstructions, narrow, shallow channels protect most approaches to the islands. Lacking any assurance that it can resupply the Offshore Islands if they are attacked or blockaded, Taiwan is taking steps to increase stockpiles of food and equipment there--

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Discussion Seizure of the islands would bring the PRC substantial military benefits. One important benefit would be the elimination of 22 percent of the ROC's best ground forces. Mobilization on Taiwan could offset this loss, but the psychological blow to the military as well as the civilian population would be immense. In addition, control of the Offshore Islands would permit the PRC to use the cities of Amoy and Fuchou as significant staging areas for any future attempt to

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invade Taiwan. The ROC also would be denied a forward operating base and lose some ability to collect intelligence on mainland activities. The PRC also could conduct interfleet transfers or transits through the strait with less risk.

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Economically, opening the ports of Amoy and Fuchou would be beneficial to the PRC. Control of the areas near the coast also might permit Peking's merchant shipping to transit the strait rather than make the long round east of Taiwan which presently is required.

Nevertheless, the great risks associated with initiating operations against the Offshore Islands suggest that a military solution will not be attempted at least through 1976. Although there is little or no chance that the US would intervene militarily, a quick victory is not possible, and the US would therefore have time to reconsider its options. Under such circumstances, the PRC might expect the US to retard or postpone its reduction of forces on Taiwan. Furthermore, the US might be expected to increase its military support for Taiwan, including

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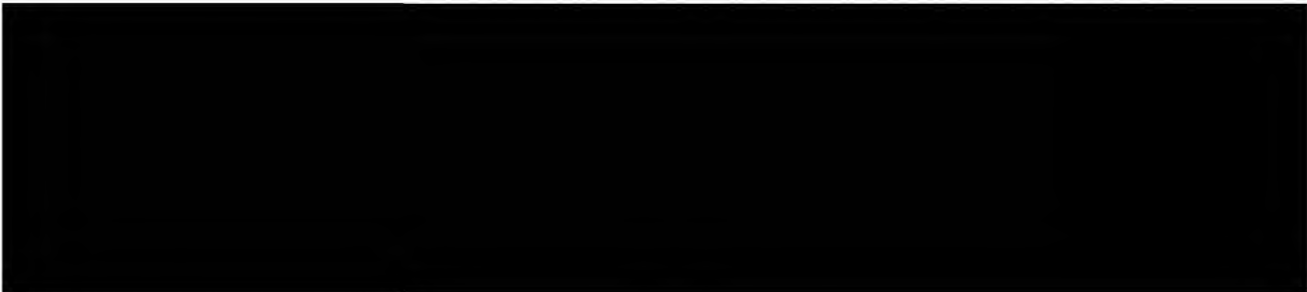
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the replacement of combat losses and, possibly, the introduction of more sophisticated weapons. In addition, the PRC air assets required for an assault against the Offshore Islands might reduce the reserves for the northern border and could weaken the PRC's ability to defend against an attack by the Soviet Union.

Diplomatically, Peking would have to reckon that actions against the Offshore Islands would damage the Sino-US detente and possibly result in increased US military aid to the ROC. Under such circumstances, the Soviets might attempt to establish some influence with Taiwan.

25X6 Regardless of the consequences, Peking has the military capability to gain control of the islands. The islands' 25X6
dependence upon Taiwan for air and sea supply of food, ammunition, and other logistic requirements makes them vulnerable to air and



A direct amphibious assault by the PRC against Quemoy and Ma-tsu probably would be impossible. For example, the largest US strategic amphibious operation during World War II, the

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attack on Okinawa, matched some 200,000 US personnel against only about 30,000 Japanese. But Peking has a much smaller capability for strategic amphibious assault than that employed by the US at Okinawa. While the PRC has the capability to put troops ashore, it cannot provide sufficient heavy equipment and the logistic support to maintain a beachhead. The 80,000 ROC troops, and the extensive fortifications on the islands would prove to be a formidable obstacle. At a minimum, PRC casualties would be extremely high.

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Pescadores

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PRC Military Capabilities:



Likelihood of Initiating Military Action: very doubtful

Opposing Forces:

	<u>PRC</u>	<u>ROC</u>
Ground	33,000	6,600
Air	1,500 fighters 200 bombers	250 fighters
Navy	37 submarines 3 DDGSS 4 DEGSS 1 DEG 5 DES 14 PFs 26 PC/PCEs 200 PT/PTHs 15 MSFs 27 LST/LSMs	3 DDGSS 3 DDGSS 12 DDs 3 DES 10 PFs 3 PCEs 6 PCEs 3 MTBs 27 LST/LSM/LSDs 14 MSCs

Background: The Pescadores are a group of islands totaling some 50 square miles, which lie about 30 nautical miles from Taiwan and 100 nautical miles from the mainland. The ROC maintains a naval base there and a garrison of approximately 6,600 men. Most of the islands have well-prepared defensive positions. Possession of the islands aids in controlling the Taiwan Strait and would provide an excellent forward operating base for PRC invasion of Taiwan.

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Discussion: The Pescadores are included in the US-ROC Mutual Defense Tready, which obligates the US to come to the aid of the ROC in the event of an attack. Moreover, the PRC is not likely to restrict its military operations to the Pescadores. Air strikes against bases on Taiwan probably would be required, further embroiling the US, which maintains troops there. As long as the US is committed to intervene, even in a token fashion, there is only a remote possibility that the PRC will initiate military operations. With US support for Taiwan, the enterprise would likely end in failure and result in a deterioration in Sino-US detente. Moreover, US military aid to Taiwan, including the introduction of more sophisticated weapons, would almost certainly increase, and the USSR also might attempt to establish some sort of relationship with Taiwan.

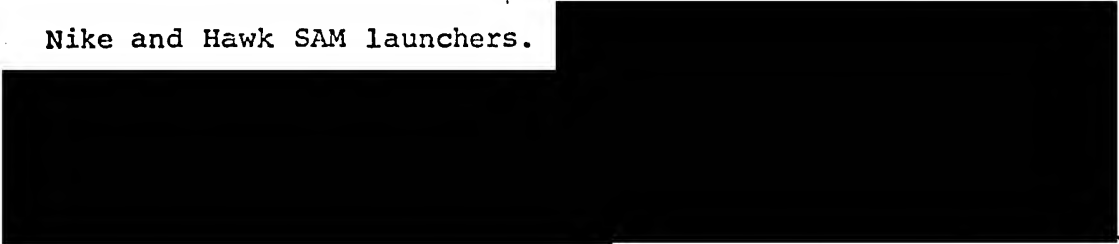
Even if the US did not intervene, a PRC blockade or amphibious assault of the Pescadores would be no simple matter. Peking would almost certainly encounter maximum ROC resistance because Taipei would regard an attack on the Pescadores as a prelude to an assault on Taiwan itself. For either option--a blockade is the least improbable--the first PRC objective would be to gain air superiority. This probably could be accomplished, but only by attacking ROC air bases on Taiwan, and at a fearful cost. The PRC has an overwhelming

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edge in the number of aircraft that could be used--up to 1,700 fighters and bombers with another 1,300 in reserve against the ROC's 250 fighter aircraft--but suffers notably from inadequate training, limited operating range for its aircraft and a dearth of air-to-air missiles. In contrast, the small ROC fighter force has superior aircraft, reliable air-to-air missiles and a corps of skilled and experienced pilots. In addition, Taiwan itself is defended by 144 Nike and Hawk SAM launchers.



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If Peking attempted to blockade the Pescadores without first gaining air superiority, only submarines could be used effectively. In such a case, the PRC probably could not completely prevent the movement of supplies and troops from Taiwan, particularly by air.

Concurrent with the neutralization of the ROC air threat, the large PRC East Sea Fleet could overwhelm the small ROC navy. The ROC navy, on the other hand, does have superior sonar and its destroyers are equipped with lethal ship-launched anti-submarine weapons. The ROC navy also is beginning to acquire its own anti-ship missiles. However, Peking's

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navy would have an overwhelming number of units available for a simultaneous attack.

While the PRC has sufficient manpower to launch an assault against the Pescadores, it has a minimal strategic lift capability and has no experience in major amphibious operations. In addition, the crucial capability to provide adequate support to maintain a beachhead is generally untested for major operations over water.

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